

# **Evaluating Sex Stereotyping in Educational Materials**

by Susan M. Williams

## **Abstract.**

Many textbooks and other educational materials are still, today, seriously gender-biased. The author believes that the elimination of the bias should be a priority for both educators and administrators alike. In order to simplify the checking of materials for bias a number of lists have been provided. Critical information about both spoken and written language and examples of bias and acceptable alternatives is discussed.

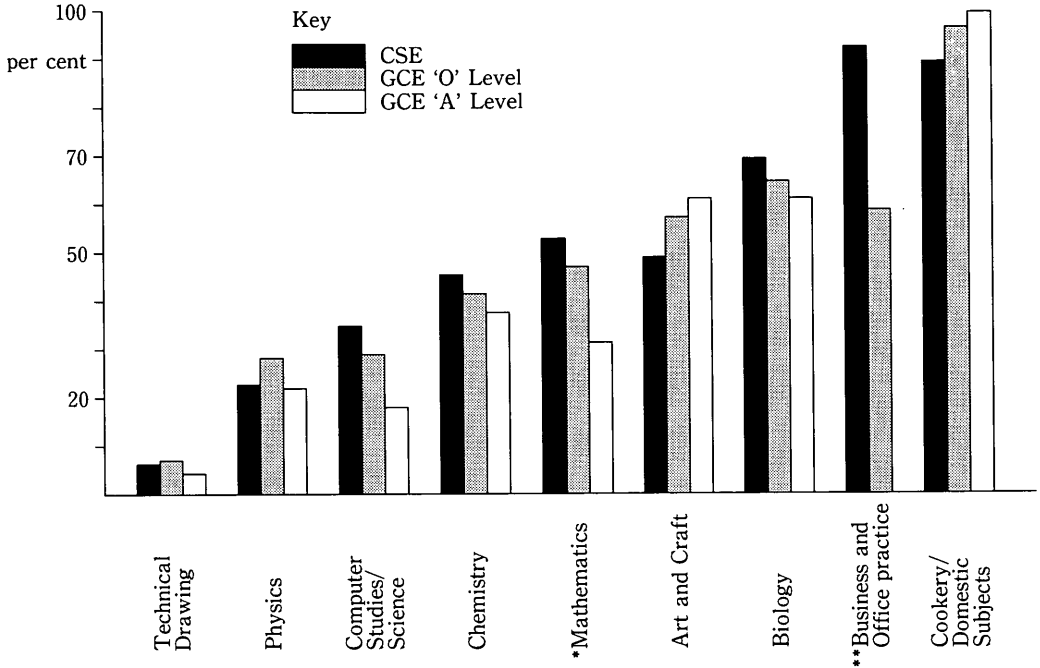
## **Introduction.**

From their very first days at school or kindergarten there are differences to be found in the learning experiences of girls and boys. Girls learn to play in the "Wendy House" corner and to be busy at clean dainty activities preparing them for caring and nurturing roles which they will traditionally take on in later life. While the girls are quietly preparing themselves in this way the boys are getting ready to take on a more varied and active role by taking advantage of the space and equipment outside in the playground, using the construction materials and playing with cars and trucks.

Throughout the rest of their education the experiences of girls and boys becomes more and more differentiated until in the later years of lower and upper secondary school they make curriculum choices based on these gender biased patterns of earlier experience and we see the academic imbalances so widely documented in the last twenty years.

The following graph shows the situation in England and Wales in 1985 and we can see how the traditional "girls" subjects and "boys" subjects are clearly polarised. Research

Females as a percentage of entrants in selected subjects for CSE, GCE 'O' and 'A' level: summer examinations, England and Wales, 1985



Notes: \*(1) Pure and Applied Mathematics as 'A' level.

\*\* (2) Commercial subjects at GCE.

Source: Department of Education and Science and Welsh Joint Education Committee.

in other European countries shows that this is not a purely British phenomenon.

As a result of the passing of the Education Reform Act (ERA) in 1988, a national curriculum has been introduced which permits much less freedom to opt out of subjects before and after the age of 16. However, if girls and boys are to fulfil their potential regardless of their sex, sex stereotyped attitudes and assumptions must be avoided lest they prevent pupils from developing their individual attributes to the full.

### Expectations and inequalities

A document published by the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education at the Hague 1979 entitled "Sex Roles in Education" points out and emphasises the relationship between stereotyped expectations of girls and boys at school and in their behaviour and expectations in later life. The following chart lists the stereotyped

characteristics attributed to each sex with expected behaviours and consequent inequality. This chart is taken from a Finnish report "Sex Roles in Educational Materials." compiled by the Finnish Council for Equal Opportunities.

### Stereotypes associated with sex roles

BOYS		GIRLS	
unruly	enterprising	quiet	emotional
energetic	self-sufficient	nice	sensitive
naughty	stubborn	neat	helpful
aggressive	conscious of responsibility	social	
MEN		WOMEN	
objective	dedicated	emotional	patient
efficient	enterprising	sentimental	loving
strong	determined	weak	sensitive
unafraid	logical	submissive	passive
wise	unemotional	evasive	impulsive
punitive		caring	self-sacrificing
		expressive	dreaming

### Stereotypes of behaviour of the sexes

HOME AND FAMILY		CAREER/EMPLOYMENT		SOCIAL ACTIVITIES	
MAN	WOMAN	MAN	WOMAN	MAN	WOMAN
discipline breadwinner head of household rests at home	housework children's care and upbringing family's emotional life	technique business management independent work work that 'needs a man'	inst. care services auxiliary work manual work work 'suitable for woman'	politics local and central govt. activities	organisations clubs non-involvement

### Lack of equality on account of sex-rôle stereotyping

INEQUALITY BETWEEN SEXES IN SELECTED SECTORS		
man in position of authority, dominates man's needs and advantages given priority woman's own needs are suppressed in time and place, including morally	latent unemployment among women second-rate employment lower wages work not appreciated few opportunities for promotion men more subject to stress	more difficult for women to join decision-making bodies everyday situation causes passivity woman's status not respected by decision-making bodies

The above chart was produced to illustrate the situation in Nordic countries, and similar work can be found in other research done in Europe and America from the middle seventies on. The sheer amount of research on sex stereotyping and the curriculum shows the growing concern on the part of governments and educators alike with the effects that sex bias in schools can have on the futures of our children and the implications for society as a whole. The authors of the Hague report comment:

“Current sex role stereotyping causes also social waste because individual talents and aptitudes frequently are not fully exploited. As a result of dual work roles and outright discrimination, women usually remain in subordinate positions.”

### **Teaching materials.**

The question of sex role stereotyping and sexism in educational materials and media has been identified as a major problem in all the countries of the European Community. The growing realisation of the bias and lack of realism of the sexism in teaching materials is a central influence in combating the hidden curriculum. There are two aspects of this bias which need to be addressed. Firstly, the content of the curriculum itself. Certain subjects have been identified as being particularly male biased. The Equal Opportunities Commission, the National Union of Teachers, the Commission of the European Communities and other bodies all point out in their respective publications the need for urgent revision of the content of the History, Science, Mathematics, Design and Technology, English Literature and Careers and Development curricula to name only the areas of grave urgency. History and Social Science were singled out as being particularly unrealistic and biased.

The second aspect of bias in educational materials I should like to consider in more detail. This concerns the language itself used to deliver the subject matter, the medium of education both in its spoken and written forms. The way language is used in the school can play an important role in either reinforcing or challenging sex stereotyping or bias.

The power of language is enormous whether in its spoken or written form. It is our major form of communication and therefore words often convey more than their surface meaning. Each word has a history of usage and meaning, often changing over time, so it carries with it a whole series of messages to listeners and readers in a particular time

or social situation. Language reflects various aspects of society, including sexual inequality. For this reason it is essential to examine language used in schools for the assumptions and messages behind words and phrases commonly appearing in books, materials and in the day to day life of the school.

There are three ways in which language can be sexist, by stereotyping females and males, by excluding women and girls, and by classing women and girls as inferior, and I should like to consider each of these in more detail.

### **Stereotyping**

This is done by using specific words in relation to men and boys and others for women and girls, ascribing characteristics to all people in one sex rather than to some people in each sex. Traditionally appropriate descriptions for men include, strong, active, intelligent, clear-headed, and calm. Those associated with women include, weak, gentle, passive, caring, soft, silly. Those traits attributed to men are normally ones most valued in our society and are usually associated with being a capable adult, whereas those attributed to women are generally viewed as less valuable or useful. The fact that many men and women share the same traits is ignored.

Pupils are subjected to this stereotyping not only through their textbooks but through the language used by the teacher to praise or blame them. Katherine Clarricoates found that in many situations teachers categorised behaviours as belonging to a particular gender and pupils would be reprimanded for falling outside gender expectations. She includes such examples as: "Gillian Smith, I will not tolerate such tomboyish behaviour" and, to a boy, "Why are you wandering around like a old women, Simon? Find yourself something to do." Identifying pupils behaviour by their sex and comparing one gender with the other was also often noted, for example: "Which boys have hung their coats on the floor? You wouldn't find girls doing that!"

Another way of stereotyping through language relates to work deemed appropriate for men or women by the titles given to the jobs. This is most commonly seen in the cases of "fireman" instead of "fire-fighter", "headmaster" instead of "head" or "head teacher", "labourers" get called "workmen" and people who run a home are usually called "housewives" although they may not be female. Of course both men and women can

perform such jobs and non-stereotypical alternatives should be used.

If such language is constantly used children soon pick up the messages about not only suitable behaviour for their sex, but also appropriate roles. Girls will, for example, find it difficult to imagine themselves in a job or a position normally referred to in the masculine form.

### **Exclusion**

The terms “he”, “his” or “men” can be used in either a specific or a generic sense. Using these terms in a generic manner excludes women and girls. For example, “the woman gave the man a book” uses “man” in a specific way whereas, “as a mammal, man gives birth to live young” is generic, and, indeed, rather startling. This can be confusing, and at times ridiculous, but also contributes to the invisibility of women. Research has shown that young children and even adults understand words such as “chairman” or “caveman” as masculine nouns and do not see women included in the meaning. Such generic terms are easily replaced by more accurate and non-exclusive terms, for “mankind” we can use “humanity”, “people”, “human beings”, for “he”, or “his” we can use “he or she”, “her or his” or we can simply make sentences plural and use “they” or “their”.

### **Trivialising**

Sexist language can also be used to trivialise women and girls and class them as inferior to men and boys. Over time, endings and other indicators have been added to some words giving them a feminine form. Examples include “usherette”, “manageress”, “actress”. This defines females as non-males giving the impression that the world is male unless proved otherwise. These structures also give the impression of cuteness or smallness, after all, what is a cigarette if not a small cigar!

In other cases the word “woman” or “lady” is added to make it clear that the norm is male and the female extraordinary, e.g. “lady doctor”, “woman pilot” etc.

In addition to this some words used to describe women and girls have acquired negative connotations such as “sissy”, “girlish”, and “spinster”. Sometimes patronising expressions are used in place of the appropriate ones as in “the fairer/weaker sex” instead of “woman/women”. Often too, terms with different connotations are used to describe the

same traits. Some examples are:

Man	Woman
assertive	aggressive
decisive	pushy
forceful	overbearing

or women are described only in relation to men, for example, “Joe Smith and his wife” instead of “Joe and Joan Smith”, “Bob Brown’s secretary” or “Mark’s girlfriend”. A more detailed list of all the above can be found in the appendices.

### Conclusion

All of the above examples of gender biased language occur in both written and spoken forms, and assessing textbooks and other educational materials for bias should be a priority for schools and parents alike. Books play an important part in helping young readers define what is seen by society as being acceptable behaviour for their sex, and so should offer a wide number of roles and these should not be portrayed as suitable for one sex only. In both spoken and written language these points should be kept in mind. Language is powerful and plays a subtle yet effective part in shaping attitudes. Avoiding sexist language need not be clumsy or pedantic. Usually it is more accurate and often it is clearer and briefer. Some organisations in the U.K., including local authorities have already taken steps to ensure their publications avoid stereotyping and give equal regard to women and men. Schools need to ensure that in their use of language they are also treating all pupils and teachers with respect.

### Definitions

The following may be useful when evaluating materials.

**EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES;** describes policies and practices which provide equal access and rights, and seek to remove discrimination against people on the basis of sex. (or class, race, sexual orientation or disability).

**GENDER;** is the socially ascribed characteristic of “femininity” or “masculinity” as opposed to the biological difference between males and females. It refers to the learned behaviour and attributes determined by society as suitable for members of one sex, and varies between cultures.

**POSITIVE ACTION;** refers to steps taken to redress past inequalities and imbalances between

the sexes. This may mean more that making the same provision available for both sexes.

**SEX DISCRIMINATION:** refers to individual or general practices which by default or intent, put individuals or groups of people at a disadvantage because of their sex. The Sex Discrimination Act 1975 defines two kinds:

**direct discrimination:** where a person, intentionally or not, is treated less favourably than a member of the opposite sex.

**indirect discrimination:** where treatment may appear to be equal in a formal sense, but is discriminatory in its effect on one sex.

**SEXISM:** refers to the way in which underlying attitudes and structures lead to inequality between the sexes. It is generally used to refer to the prejudices and discrimination faced by women and girls.

**SEX STEREOTYPING:** refers to assumptions that a person's abilities, interests characteristics and behaviour are determined by their sex. The Equal Opportunities Commission defines it as a "fixed and over simplified idea of the usual behaviour, the abilities or the aspirations of the opposite sex" Sex stereotyping can become a self fulfilling prophesy. If attributes are constantly attributed to one sex only, they will continue to be associated with members of that sex regardless of whether individuals have those attributes.

**NON-SEXIST:** approaches or materials are those which exclude overtly discriminating ideas, practices, and stereotypes based on sex.

**ANTI-SEXIST:** approaches or materials are those which are not only non-sexist but which also deliberately challenge sexist assumptions, practices and stereotypes and provide positive alternatives.

**HIDDEN CURRICULUM:** describes the way schools transmit beliefs, values and attitudes to pupils outside the formal curriculum. The National Union of Teachers Memorandum on Equal Opportunities (1984) defines it as:

"The curriculum which is not written down, but is implicit in the way subjects are presented and the way pupils are organised and treated"

Unlike the formal curriculum, the hidden, or informal curriculum is not deliberately planned or intended. This makes its impact stronger, as teachers and pupils are not always conscious of the hidden messages being conveyed through the everyday life of the school. Identifying the hidden curriculum is a crucial step in tackling the issue of sexism in education as it plays a major part in forming the school ethos, the philosophy and the principles operating in the school.

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Towards Equality for Girls and Boys: Guidelines on countering sexism in schools.  
The National Union of Teachers.

Checklist 1 Assessing sex bias in non-fiction books for older pupils

Title of book \_\_\_\_\_

	F	M
	_____	_____
Are the authors, contributors and editors, women or men ?	_____	_____
How many women and men are named in the <i>Contents list</i> ?	_____	_____
How many women and men are in the <i>Index</i> ?	_____	_____
How many illustrations include women/men ?*	Black White	_____ _____
How many illustrations are of specific women/men ?*	Black White	_____ _____

How many times are women mentioned in the Text ?

\*Do they appear as independent people or as *dependents* of men (wives, etc.) ?

\*Are they shown in a wide range of activities or limited to *stereotyped activities* (housewives, spinning, social reformers) ?

\*Are they described in the same way as men or is *appearance* emphasised ?

Does *language* exclude gender-biased descriptions of people such as man, workman, farmer and wife ?

Does the *subject matter* emphasise and value concerns traditionally associated with men rather than with women, for example, in history, war, diplomacy, trade, parliament, inventions, rather than family life, work, housing, local politics, living standards ?

## Checklist 2 Evaluating materials

- Are women and men from diverse cultural and ethnic background portrayed in a wide range of roles, including non-traditional ones ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are women present as: \_\_\_\_\_
  - authors in literature anthologies \_\_\_\_\_
  - as scientists in science books \_\_\_\_\_
  - as leaders, reformers, pioneers, etc., in history books \_\_\_\_\_
  - as managers in business education books \_\_\_\_\_
  - as homemakers, secretaries, primary teachers, telephone operators, clerks ? \_\_\_\_\_
- How well-integrated into texts are the comments on women ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are the comments bunched into a separate 'women's page', chapter, or paragraph ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are women of different race, religious, and ethnic groups included ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Does the author make generalisations about 'man' ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Does 'man' mean 'human' or 'male' ? \_\_\_\_\_
- If it means 'human', are the activities, characteristics, etc. described or pictured common to both sexes ? \_\_\_\_\_
- If it means 'males', is equal coverage given to 'women' ? (The 'generic usage' of 'man' and 'mankind' are ambiguous, and worse, it makes many girls and women feel excluded and dehumanised.) \_\_\_\_\_
- Count the pictures of people in the materials \_\_\_\_\_ Total \_\_\_\_\_
- Are females half of the total ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do women, men, girls, and boys represent diverse racial, religious, ethnic, and class backgrounds ? \_\_\_\_\_
- In pictures which illustrate both females and males, are females independently significant, or are they appendages to male characters ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Does content focus as often on females as on males ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Does the material portray females and males of diverse racial, religious, and ethnic groups, with their similarities and differences in such a way as to build positive images ? \_\_\_\_\_
- How much emphasis is given to traditional 'female' values, such as compassion, consideration, tenderness, as opposed to traditional 'male' values such as assertiveness, risk-taking, and strength ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are these values offered as ideals for both sexes ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are males who are shown doing activities such as reading, admired for their school achievement ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do the pictures or story suggest that boys are too active and mischievous to be successful in school ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Does the story line show subtle bias ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do males, especially white males, have the power and make decisions ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do females of minority groups function in subservient positions ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are the achievements of girls and women based on their own initiative and intelligence, or is their success due to their good looks or to their relationships with males ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Would the story be essentially the same if the gender, or ethnic group, of the characters were reversed ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Is there stereotyping that suggests a negative image of females/males ? People of particular ethnic groups ? \_\_\_\_\_
- When boys and girls have different viewpoints, are the girls' behaviours looked upon as 'problems' to be 'solved' ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are girls expected to 'act like boys' in order to be accepted as comrades or as equals ? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are sensitive boys labelled 'cissies' ? \_\_\_\_\_

## Checklist 3 Evaluating text

	Black F	White F	Black M	White M
<b>1 Sexism by exclusion or omission</b> (Are women or girls absent from texts or less represented than men or boys ?)				
● Number of female/male characters or females/males mentioned in the text				
● Number of nameless females/males				
<b>2 Sexism by subordination</b> (Who has the more dominant role ?)				
● Number of females/males initiating a conversation				
Taking 'Turn' in dialogues				
● Number of contributions made by females/males				
● Number of women dependent on men, e.g. Peter's secretary, John and his girlfriend, so and so's wife etc. Number of men dependent on women				
● Number of women mentioned in their own right, e.g. not as so and so's wife, and vice versa				
● Number of women/men doing a paid job				
● Number of women/men involved in housework or looking after children				
● Number of women/men involved in intellectual activities				
● Number of women/men with a high status job				
<b>3 Sexism by distortion</b>				
● Number of females/males presented as being emotional, weepy, irrational, irresponsible, etc.				
● Number of females who have a passive or negative role, e.g. doing as they are told, appearing helpless, being mentioned for their looks rather than for their actions. Number of men who have a passive role				
● Number of females/males involved in physical activities: leisure and work, e.g. doing sports, driving cars, decorating the house etc.				
<b>4 Sexism by degradation</b>				
● Number of women/men presented as sex objects				
● Number of females/males shown as talking too much, chatting and wasting time				
● Number of females/males presented as stupid, mindless, spending money carelessly etc . . . .				
<b>Any examples</b> where women are shown as inferior to men, patronised by men e.g. 'Not bad for a girl', or 'sponging' off men.				

from Libraries and Learning Resources, *Genderwatch!* © Cambridge University Press 1992

adapted from a checklist devised by a group working at the ILEA Modern Language Teacher's Centre

## CHECKLIST FOR ANALYZING AN ELEMENTARY READER

Yes No

- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 1. All members of the family participate regularly and equally in household chores.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 2. There are favorable presentations of mothers employed outside of the home.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 3. Women working outside of the home hold administrative and/or technical jobs.  
They are not all teachers, librarians, social workers, nurses or secretaries.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 4. Fathers take an active and competent part in housekeeping and child-rearing and are depicted showing feelings of tenderness.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 5. Girls and boys participate equally in physical activities.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 6. Girls and boys participate equally in intellectual activities.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 7. One-parent families are portrayed, and the portrayal does not suggest that children with a single parent automatically suffer from it.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 8. Male and female characters respect each other as equals.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 9. Girls and boys are both shown to be self-reliant, clever, and brave-capable of facing their own problems and finding their own solutions.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 10. Multiple-parent families (divorced, remarried) are portrayed and the portrayal does not suggest that such family conditions are automatically damaging to the children.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 11. There are no unchallenged derogatory sex stereotyped characterizations, such as "Boys make the best architects," or "Girls are silly."
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 12. Both girls and boys are shown as having a wide range of sensibilities, feelings, and responses.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 13. Both girls and boys have a wide variety of career options.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 14. Adults who have chosen not to marry are portrayed favorably.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 15. There are equal numbers of stories with girls and boys as central characters.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 16. The male noun or pronoun (*mankind, he*) is not used to refer to all people.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 17. Girls' accomplishments, not their clothing or features, are emphasized.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 18. Clothing and appearance are not used to stereotype characters.
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 19. Non-human characters and their relationships are not personified in sex stereotypes (for example, depicting dogs as masculine, cats as feminine).
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ 20. [For readers which incorporate biographies . . . ] biographies of women in a variety of roles are included.

This material is reprinted from *Self-Study Guide to Sexism in Schools*, prepared by Education Committee of Pennsylvanians for Women's Rights, Pennsylvania Department of Education, Harrisburg, PA(1975).

CHECKLIST FOR ANALYZING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Directions: Place a check in the appropriate space. Most items should be evaluated separately for each sex.

		Almost Always	Occasionally	Rarely
1. Are girls and boys, men and women consistently represented in equal balance ?		_____	_____	_____
2. Do boys and girls participate equally in both physical and intellectual activities ?		_____	_____	_____
3. Do girls and boys each receive positive recognition for their endeavors ?	Females Males	_____ _____	_____ _____	_____ _____
4. Do boys and girls, fathers and mothers participate in a wide variety of domestic chores, not only the ones traditional for their sex ?	Females Males	_____ _____	_____ _____	_____ _____
5. Do both girls and boys have a variety of choices and are they encouraged to aspire to various goals, including nontraditional ones if they show such inclination ?	Females Males	_____ _____	_____ _____	_____ _____
6. Are both boys and girls shown developing independent lives, independently meeting challenges and finding their own solutions ?	Females Males	_____ _____	_____ _____	_____ _____
7. Are woen and men shown in a variety of occupations, including non-traditional ones ? When women are portrayed as fulltime homemakers, are they depicted as competent and decisive ?	Females Males	_____ _____	_____ _____	_____ _____
8. Do characters deprecate themselves because of their sex ? (Example: "I'm only a girl.") Do others use denigrating language in this regard ? ("That's just like a women.")	Females Males	_____ _____	_____ _____	_____ _____
9. Do the illustrations stereotype the characters, either in accordance to the dictates of the text or in contradiction to it ?	Females Males	_____ _____	_____ _____	_____ _____
10. Is inclusionary language used ? (For example: "police officer" intsead of "policeman," "staffed by" instead of "manned by," "all students will submit the assignment" instead of "each student will submit his assignment," and so on.)		_____	_____	_____

This list was developes by the International Reading Association: Committee on Sexism and Reading.  
Reproduced from "Guide for Evaluating sex Stereotyping in Reading Materials", Journal of  
Reading, 240, (December 1977)

## SEXIST LANGUAGE

Scott, Foresman, and Company gives the following examples of sexist language:

**Examples of Sexist Language**

- The ancient Egyptians allowed women considerable control over property
- the farmer and his wife; a homeowner and his family
- Marie Curie did what few people - men or women - could do

**Possible Alternatives**

- Women in ancient Egypt had considerable control over property
- a farm couple; homeowners and their children
- Marie Curie did what few people could do

Macmillan Publishing Company provides these examples:

- Women were given the vote after the First World War
- The prairie farmer was concerned about the price of his wheat
- The American colonists brought their wives and children to the New World

- Women won the vote after the First World War
- Prairie farmers were concerned about the price of wheat
- American colonist families came to the New World.